If you have a good idea in America, you can do business,” says Michele Caniato, sitting in a conference room in his office on West 25th Street. “In Italy, no one takes you seriously if you are under 50.” At 36, Caniato presides over Cultura and Commerce, a design consultancy that matches Ferrante 500 companies and cultural institutions with designers like Philippe Starck and Marcel Wanders.

“I wrote Rem Koolhaas a letter recently, and he responded,” he says, uncooking a goofy smile that seems at odds with his wheeling-and-dealing reputation. “That would never happen in Italy.”

Caniato is being modest. It rarely works like that in America, either, unless you’ve got someone as singular as Caniato, who can ring up Koolhaas, along with Bill Gates (Starck designed a mouse for Microsoft) and Wolfgang Puck (the chef will create a cookware collection for Salton), because of his talent for making things happen.

Caniato was born into what he refers to as the “Italian design mafia.” His uncle, Giulio Castelli, founded Kartell. His mother was a graphic designer, but his father was a banker, and he felt the tug of the worlds of both art and business. He studied architecture and industrial
design at Politecnico University of Milan, but
after graduating in 1994, he wasn’t sure of a
career path. At his uncle’s suggestion, he came
to work at Kartell in New York, with George
Beylerian, who would become his mentor.
In 1997, the two formed Material Connect
(Beylerian is C.E.O. of the company, while
Caniato is executive vice president), a materials
resource library for designers, architects,
engineers and manufacturers. As clients like
Niko and BMW visited to check out the latest
fibers, gels and resins, Caniato recognized
that there was a gap in the design market for
connecting the creative with the corporate.
“For a long time, people looked at design with
two criteria: How much does it cost? And
how can I return it?” Caniato says. “But now
housewives in Ohio know who Starck and
Michael Graves are.” In 2001, he established
Culture and Commerce with a grand-slam
commission: Philippe Starck would create
32 household products for Target. The
collaboration, however, was not a runaway
success: the products sold inconsistently,
as mothers were perplexed by items like the
slick baby monitor that doubled as a necklace.
Caniato glosses over the failure like any good
agent, explaining: “You need to be brave and
make bold statements that might not sell.
It creates a buzz.”
“Michele wants to be the William Morris
of the design world,” says the developer Sam
Nazarian and discovered that he came from one of
the most “honorable” families on the West
Coast. “Sam is a good family guy,” says Caniato,
scouring more like an old-school consigliere
rather than a BlackBerry-punching power agent.
Caniato also recognized that Nazarian was
interested in doing something different and
almost monumental in scale. Caniato brokered
an exclusive seven-year contract between
Nazarian and Starck, in which the designer will
work on properties in Los Angeles, New York,
Miami and other locations. “Philippe will
relandscape the architecture of Los Angeles,”
Caniato boasts. The $70 million Miami project
puts Starck right back in South Beach, where he
tossed the now-exhausted white-on-white
boutique formula that started at the Delano. Caniato will
be involved in every step, playing
advisor, guardian angel and
diplomat. “With Sam and
Philippe, you need a mediator,”
he says. “It’s like two dogs,
both trying to be the toughest.”
For Marcel Wanders, Caniato
keeps the project on a more
intimate scale. “I never want
my designers competing,” he
says. “Marcel’s work is
emotionally driven.” (He cites
Wanders’s candle lamp for
Flos, which turns itself off
when you blow on it.) Under
Nazarian’s guidance, the radical
Dutch designer has created a
glass for Bombay Sapphire’s ad
campaign, and he recently
designed the lobby and Thor
restaurant at Manhattan’s Hotel
on Riverton in his signature
high-baroque motif.
“Michele understands
the big picture,” says the
Italian designer Dror BenShetrit,
who contacted Caniato at the suggestion of Paolo Antonelli,
an architecture and design
curator at the Museum of
Modern Art. Caniato liked
BenShetrit’s work but waited
an entire year to sign him.
“He wanted to make sure I
could handle the business,” says
BenShetrit.
Caniato’s first move with
BenShetrit was bold—he
hooked him up with Rosenthal,
the 127-year-old German
chinaware company. BenShetrit’s
Vase of Phases—a porcelain
vase that looks smashed and
then reassembled—became a
surprise hit. Recently, Caniato
has negotiated a veritable
windfall, landing him 15
different commissions,
including six more collections
for Rosenthal, a new Levi’s
showroom in Manhattan, and a
footwear project with Puma.
Despite the impressive record,
Caniato offers more than just a
solid handshake and a nose for
numbers. “He’s not just about
gaining the big business. He’s
dedicated to his designers,”
BenShetrit says. Indeed, Caniato
is always networking. Currently,
he’s in the market for a nice
girl for BenShetrit. Perhaps his
old friend Starck sums him
up best. “You could leave him
with your keys, your bank-
account number, your wife
and your children, and everything
will be protected and
respected,” Starck says. “He’s
totally reliable.”